

some seem glaring. Among these is anything about the Second World War campaign in Timor, though it has produced several memorable books, and there is nothing from J.E. MacDonnell, a seaman who worked his way up to commissioned rank, and subsequently produced many well-written naval books of fact and fiction.

The theatres of war from which the extracts are taken are highly selective. There is little about the many thousands of Australian air crew who operated from Britain, and nothing of the Australian bomb disposal men in London—there could have been something from Ivan Southall's *Softly Tread the Brave*. Robert Menzies' vivid accounts of the Blitz in his diaries would also, I think, be worthy of mention. He was, to the best of my knowledge, the only Australian prime minister ever to come under enemy fire when in office, and behaved with considerable bravery. Where is writing by Australians serving in the Atlantic like Michael Thwaites, author of *Atlantic Odyssey* and a

writer to hold his own in the highest company? Where, for that matter, is Peter Ryan's classic *Fear Drive My Feet*?

Another omission is anything from John Ross's *Lucky Ross*, one of the best accounts of service life and travel all over the world in peace and war by a professional Australian serviceman, as distinct from a professional writer. Ross, who was transferred out of HMAS *Sydney* just before she was lost with all hands and survived the sinking of *Canberra* at the Battle of Savo Island by a fluke, was also the author of *Stormy Petrel*, the classic story of *Sydney*. There is also *Desperate Praise*, an excellent collection of writings by Vietnam veterans put together by Dr John Coe a few years ago. All of which, I suppose, is to say that one anthology is not enough.

*Hal G.P. Colebatch's biography of his father, Sir Hal Colebatch, **Steadfast Knight**, has just been published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press.*

## CATULLUS, TODAY AND ALWAYS

by Olivier Burckhardt

*Poems of Love and Hate*, by Catullus, translated by Josephine Balmer; Bloodaxe, 2003, about \$35.

*Chasing Catullus*, by Josephine Balmer; Bloodaxe, 2004, about \$35.

*Catullus for Children*, by Anna Jackson; Auckland University Press, 2004, \$24.95.

ANYONE WHO HAS SPENT any time in Italy will have seen Catullus innumerable times: a young man impeccably dressed, sunglasses dangling precariously from one ear, standing nonchalantly on a street corner or in a piazza surrounded by a group of like-dressed youths. Fellini's *Vitelloni* admirably portrayed just such a group of amiable layabouts cum rebels. Love, when they are not too busy posturing, mocking, or preening each other, is their chief goal and interest.

Apart from the sunglasses, things have not changed much over the twenty-one centuries that have elapsed since Catullus and friends jeered and taunted friends and foes and styled themselves the neoterics or "the moderns" (a term adapted into Latin from the Greek *neoterikos*). The "new poets" embraced the standards and forms of Alexandrian poetry: the short and sharp epyllion, lyric, epigram and elegiac were used as

weapons against anything that smacked of the utilitarian and patriotic old guard with their moralising epic-bashing endless stanzas.

Of Catullus himself we know very little, and any picture that we might formulate based on the tone and whatever information might be gleaned from the poetry, as the picture drawn above for example, might be as fictitious as the image that is built by his poetry. For all we know Catullus might have been a shy and introverted young man who fantasised or imagined an alter ego whose sometime lover was Rome's most scandalous woman of the day, or at least someone styled upon her.

St Jerome gave Catullus' birth date as 87 BC and said he died when he was thirty, but the date is usually corrected, on the basis of a similar sounding consul, to 84? BC with a death in 54? BC after which, based on Catullus' poetry, there is no evidence of his being alive. Although a thirty-year life span needs to be treated with caution (as an idealised rounding-off), the fact that Ovid in his *Amores* speaks of the youthful temples of his learned Catullus being crowned with ivy corroborates an early death.

The scant knowledge we have of the youth who wrote the extraordinary verses that miraculously survived the centuries to be "rediscovered" in the fourteenth century, is made up in part by our knowledge of the times in which he wrote them. Born around the time of the establishment of Sulla's dictatorship and dying within a few years of Caesar's appointment as dictator, Catullus wrote through the chaotic times of the power struggle between Caesar and Pompey. The corollary of domestic strife and foreign conquest that characterised the years between the dictatorships was

greater moral and social freedom.

The Rome of the late Republic was to seem, from the perspective of the Augustan empire that usurped it, a time of cosmic breakdown in which boundaries of gender and social roles were blurred; rife with sexual immorality and disregard for household gods. Based on the number of laws which were to be promulgated by Augustus to restrict and segregate Roman women of rank, and curtail “immoral” behaviour by both sexes, the preceding age in which Catullus wrote could be equated with our own times. Not only did women enjoy greater social prominence in private and public spheres (some, such as Clodia Metelli, née Pulcher—Catullus’ Lesbia—achieved notoriety), there was also a general daredevil atmosphere, as when Publius Clodius Pulcher, Clodia’s brother, profaned the Mysteries of the Bona Dea in 62 BC by attending the women-only gathering in disguise. Whatever *faux pas* earned Ovid permanent banishment under Augustus’ reign would probably not have caused such a stern reaction had he lived during Catullus’ times of relative freedom, before the civil wars unleashed by Caesar’s assassination in 44 BC.

In the long history of Catullan traces, imitations and translations into various European languages (from Petrarch in the fourteenth century, Ronsard and John Skelton in the sixteenth, Tennyson and Lessing in the eighteenth and nineteenth, down to a veritable popular revival in the twentieth century with Thornton Wilder and Carl Orff) the verses that have been deemed too crude or obscene have mostly been left aside, bowdlerised, or gentrified. Free of any puritanical constraints, Josephine Balmer’s translation of Catullus in *Poems of Love and Hate* is a true deliverance of these verses into a language that, like the original, plays with the full range of the vocabulary that we all know, even if we have never uttered certain items.

As Balmer outlines in her excellent introduction, Catullus’ mixture of recondite and scurrilous language, his hidden innuendos and double entendres, are able to be better understood thanks to the studies undertaken into the sexual idiom of ancient Rome, studies “such as J.N. Adams’ breathtakingly exhaustive *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*”, that allow us to share Catullus’ jokes “possibly for the first time in two thousand years”.

Underpinned by a thorough awareness of the scholarly research on Catullus (including the various arguments for keeping or changing the order of the poems—Balmer opts for the latter but provides an indispensable key to the poems’ received order), the poet’s vivacity and playfulness that Balmer brings to her translation make of *Poems of Love and Hate* a truly faultless opus. It brings the individuals that people Catullus’ verses alive and easily imaginable in modern-day history (one has only to think of how Catullus would play the Clinton–Lewinsky episode into a poem). The only

tease that Balmer can be accused of is that we have to wait for another volume for Catullus’ longer mythological and ritual verses. Perchance Bloodaxe might consider a volume that includes all the poems with the original Latin text facing these excellent translations and their succinct and nimble notes.

The palimpsest tradition that Latin literature brought to a cross-cultural fruition by overwriting Greek themes and forms with Roman concerns is particularly rich in Catullus. Not only does he play with Sapphic themes and metres by naming his love Lesbia, he also challenges the gender boundary, whereas amongst men (and most of his poems are addressed to other men) he maintains the macho stance and suggests sexual acts as a means to dominate and humiliate an adversary. With his poems to Lesbia he employs Sappho’s voice to woo and curse his lover who holds complete power over him. In postmodern-speak we might say that Catullus appropriated or subverted a female voice to address an emancipated woman.

In her translation Balmer resists the temptation “as a twenty-first-century woman, to subvert Catullus’ male Roman sensibilities, overwriting them with an implicit, if playful, challenge to his imagery of domination and submission”. Catullus’ poetry being “quite subversive enough”, Balmer does not overturn the poetry but brings a wonderful playfulness to bear on her translation by not taking “his belligerent posturing too seriously. But then neither, one suspects, did Catullus.”

THE PLAYFULNESS and the temptation to add a new twist to ancient poems are given free reign in Balmer’s *Chasing Catullus: Poems, Translations & Transgressions* and in the first section of Anna Jackson’s *Catullus for Children*. Captivated by the palimpsest tradition of “translating and reworking Catullus into different versions and different voices”, Jackson’s twelve poems mesh the images and material from various poems of Catullus, at times bringing two or three poems together, into youthful verses reminiscent of a playground atmosphere. Catullus’ kiss poem, perhaps the most often translated and adapted of all his poems, is re-fashioned in two of Jackson’s poems. In “Deer” the chase for kisses is wonderfully light and swift:

... I only want a thousand kisses  
and then a hundred more,  
and then just one more thousand  
and a hundred added to that,  
and if we add some thousands more,  
who would be able to count?  
We could kiss a million times  
and no one could tell!  
A billion and the whirl of mouths

## BOOKS

would make such a force field  
it would propel you into class  
invisible, but on arrival, such a star.  
*How did you do that?*  
You wouldn't have to tell.

Catullus' last two stanzas, translated by Balmer as "Lesbia's Kisses", run:

So let me have a thousand kisses,  
then a hundred, a thousand *gratis*,  
a hundred, a thousand, on increase.  
Then, when we've made our first million,  
we can cook the books, just smudge the sums  
so no evil eye can spy, sully,  
by reckoning up our final tally.

In "Catullus for Babies" Jackson shifts the kisses into a babe's sleeps with their constant awakenings, concluding with

How many sleeps  
till the morning?  
Let's roll it all up  
into one.

In *Chasing Catullus: Poems, Translations & Transgressions* Balmer's verses are suffused with fleeting weightless images—the collection's three sections "Before—During—After" represent a light-footed journey through the underworld of classical authors and mythology in search for an echo. Even without being aware of Balmer's preface that qualify these poems as a response to the death of her seven-year-old niece, and that "classical translation can provide us with other voices, a new currency with which to say the unsayable", these poems touch the centre—the dark heart. Yet the darkness found there is diaphanous, not heavy and sombre, but a palpable veil that nonetheless

cannot be drawn aside.

Transgressing Sophocles, "Niobe" moulds the myth of the mother whose grief turned her to stone:

Like a cloud-burst on a Penwith day  
that had to come yet still startles, shocks;  
think of granite veined with pale-rose quartz,  
a fret of stone where the bracken's frayed  
by aching, flint-pierced, moorland streams;  
the bind of ivy, the prick of gorse,  
hedged in with comfrey, helleborine;  
sob of rain, scar of hail, snow shrinking  
to sigh, the sound of words you can't say.

Like Catullus' corpus of poems that span the whole gamut of emotions, from scatological jest to the mourning of a brother's death, Balmer's collection sweeps across the vast palimpsest tradition to overwrite it with a language of immediacy and poignancy. From the opening lines of "Juvenal Goes to Town" (which follows the opening translation of the first section) with its

There's nothing for me in Rome:  
I can't lie, can't trash a tome  
I haven't read, or find art  
in peering up a cow's ass

to the closing lines of "XII May Day", the last cycle of poems that retrace the Odyssey:

Across forty miles Crystal Palace transmitter winks,  
a sense of time and space, infinity on the blink—  
so beautiful, so terrifying, so fucking brief

Balmer has gone beyond the boundary that separates poetry from translation and has proved that far from being untranslatable, poetry is born of poetry and endures no boundaries.